

Testimony of Chief Kenneth Branham
Monacan Indian Nation
Thomasina E. Jordon Indian Tribe of VA Federal Recognition Act HR 1294
Hearing before the House Natural Resources Committee
April 18, 2007

Chairman Rahall and other distinguished members of this Committee:

My name is Kenneth Branham, the Chief of the Monacan people. I would like to thank you for allowing me to speak today on behalf of the six Virginia Tribes that are seeking Federal Recognition. The Monacan people who live in the western part of the state have been living there for thousands of years. The Monacans survived by living off the land, hunting fishing, and raising gardens of corn, beans, and squashes. Our villages were located on the flood plains of the rivers that ran through our land. The villages ranged from as few as 30 to 40 people but in some cases several hundred people would make up the villages or towns. We had our own government and religion and we lived in peace with the other Tribes around us.

In 1608 the Monacan people made contact with a new people from across the water, the first Englishmen. We had people in our Tribe that had prophesize of this strange group of people that would come to take our world away. Therefore, we tried to avoid contact with the new people. The Monacans like most Tribes traded with other groups of people and some began to get trade goods from the Powhatan Indians that came from the English. The new people were taught how to survive in this new land by the Indian people. When they could survive, things began to change. Increasingly people came and more and more land was needed to raise their crops, therefore, the Indian people were

removed from their land for the new people. With the trade goods that made life easier also came European diseases that killed a lot of the Native people. Because of this, it was not too long before Virginia Indians were outnumbered and at the mercy of the English. Our land was taken and the people were put on reservations, and our religion and languages were forbidden to be used.

The Monacans moved back into the mountains of Amherst County where the Monacan headquarters are located to this day. The Monacans did whatever they could to survive and stay out of the way of the rush of the newcomers into our land. For the next 350 years, the Monacans like the other Virginia Indians suffered many injustices. The Monacans as did the Powhatan Indians had a treaty with England and is still to this day recognized as a sovereign people by the English Government. The main treaty was the Middle Plantation Treaty of 1677 where our Chief signed along with Chiefs from the Powhatan Confederacy.

One of the most devastating things to happen to the Virginia Indians was a law that was past in 1924 called the Racial Integrity Law. Mr. Walter Plecker who was head of Vital Statistics in Virginia From 1912 to 1948 was instrumental in getting this law passed. He went about systematically changing records of certain people pertaining to their race. His belief was that there were no Indians in Virginia and this new law stated that you were either white or colored. In Amherst Co. Mr. Plecker had a hit list, which stated names like Branham, Johns, Adcocks, and Hicks were not Indian people. However, in reality these were the major names of the Monacan Indian Tribe. He tampered with birth

certificates and my family is living proof of that. I have three younger sisters who have the same mother and father and each one of us had a different race classification on our birth certificates. This was not uncommon for Virginia Indians.

Our people would go outside of Virginia in order to be married and our people were not allowed in public schools until 1962. The Monacans and some of the other Tribes in Va. did have Indian Schools. The Monacans had a mission school that was operated by the local churches; however, your educational status was limited to a maximum of the sixth grade. I am 53 years old and I attended the mission school until I was in the third grade at which time after being paraded in front of the school board 35 Monacan children and I were allowed into public schools. The following year 45 remaining Monacan students were also allowed in public schools. However, the injustices and racial prejudices did not stop there. In 1972 the first four students graduated from Amherst High School. Many children did not graduate because of the racial tensions that they endured each day. I believe that Mr. Plecker knew that a sure way to annihilate Indian people was to keep them uneducated.

We have fought hard to gain education for our children and Federal Recognition would give our children opportunities that they have not been afforded. Federal Recognition would also give our elders the benefits they need for proper health care. Our elders have suffered the hardships that Walter Plecker's actions burdened them with in order to live and I feel it is our duty to right this wrong. Our people need this federal recognition for education, health benefits, better housing, and retrieving ancestral remains for reburial.

In July 2006 54 Indian people from the Virginia Tribes traveled to England to be part of the 400th year commemoration of Jamestown. The Virginia Indians were treated with such respect and dignity and England recognized our sovereignty and honor our Treaty of 1677. It is very difficult for our people to participate in events commemorating significant dates in American history when our own heritage is denied. The Monacan Tribe was the host Tribe at Monticello the home of Thomas Jefferson for the kick off of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In this role we were the only Tribe asked to perform at the White House. Shortly before that occasion our heritage was questioned by the Park Service when they realized that we were not on the list of Federally Recognized Tribes.

As Virginian Tribes, we have played a significant role in the history of this Nation, but we are constantly reminded of the legacy of the Plecker era. The Racial Integrity Act denied our identity. I have lived through that period of Virginia history. I want the next generation to be free from that legacy. Now is the time for you to give Virginia Indians Federal Recognition which would restore their respect and dignity. Indian people in Va. are proud of their heritage and culture although some of it has been lost by the injustices bestowed upon them. My generation feels that it is our responsibility to teach our young people to be strong in their culture and to stand up for their rights. And it is their right to be proud of whom they are.